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# Where the Children Are

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NANCY GEYER

*Where the Children Are*

I

In June of 2007, a brief news item appeared in the *New York Times* under the headline, “Mother Charged After Sons’ 4 A.M. Walk.” It reported that two boys—one three years old, the other eighteen months—were found wandering around outside an A&P supermarket in northern New Jersey “like they were in their backyard,” according to a cab driver who was nearing the end of his shift when a man approached him in the store’s parking lot to alert him about the unaccompanied children. “They weren’t dressed at all,” he added. “One was in a pajama top and underwear, and the older one had on pajama bottoms, no shirt and a blanket.”

Before settling the boys into the warm back seat of his vehicle, the cabbie radioed his dispatcher, who in turn called the police, who “a short time later” arrested the boys’ twenty-four-year-old mother. She’d been out of the house, which belonged to a friend the family was visiting, when the boys left through what was assumed to be either an unlocked or open door.

I read about it in bed, late the next night. I had just started to fold the paper, too tired to finish it, when the headline roused me: where did the children go in that dead hour, I wanted to know, and how far did they travel? The answer to the first question—a supermarket—struck me as somehow both humdrum and strange. (There was no mention of the boys actually entering the store, if indeed it was open.) But the answer to the second—that they traveled “about a block”—was decidedly anti-climactic. In fact, it wasn’t much of a story, and I wondered why it was published. Crucial details were missing: where the mother had gone and for how long, and whether a father also was responsible. I was puzzled by the emphasis on the pajamas (never mind that contradictory statement that “they weren’t dressed at all”): would it have been better if no one had bothered to prepare the boys for bed? It wasn’t a trifling matter, of course, had a nightmarish quality about it to be sure, but the children were found before they were lost, hadn’t been abducted or abused (they proved to be healthy and well cared for, I would learn

later), didn't suffer so much as a scrape. It wasn't even a story about children left home alone, except in the sense that we abandon our children while we are sleeping, which is what the mother's friend, a fifty-year-old woman, was doing when the boys slipped out. I shrugged, dropped the paper to the floor, and turned out the light.

But I couldn't let go of it. *A parking lot. A supermarket. 4:00 a.m.*—they are like a playwright's opening notes to a scene, the way "A country road. A tree. Evening." appears at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*. In the dark, I was suddenly, unintentionally, wide awake, submitting to a stream of images I seemed to have no control over, images triggered by those several matter-of-fact words. As in a play, the lighting was dramatic, coming as it did with the territory: towering lamps casting a peculiar sheen across vast arenas of bare asphalt and drugging the air. Trees and bushes etched in the shadows, pale reflections of moonlight on the debris snagged in the undergrowth. There were stores, probably—some drab and lifeless, others bright as birthday cakes but closed, false promises of safety. All of it a kind of wilderness—quiet but not peaceful, because something might be waiting in the wings; it could be anything. I got no assist from the photograph that accompanied the article: it depicted the cab driver standing in the doorway of what looked like a municipal office, smiling shyly and waving at the photographer.

Over the coming weeks, whenever I happened to be idling away time on the Internet, I searched for updates on the fate of the family. Were the children still in state custody; did the mother make that quarter-million-dollar bail? At first, all I found was a handful of early reports from other sources—small New Jersey newspapers and video clips from network affiliate TV stations. The bits of information tended to cancel each other out. The boys were spotted by the cab driver or by someone else who alerted the cab driver. The family was said to be from Brooklyn, or from Pontiac, Michigan, or to have no verifiable address. The children had walked (barefoot) two hundred yards to the A&P, or two hundred feet. They were found "wandering the parking lot," "wandering in front of the supermarket," "running along a sidewalk," "sitting on a curb," "sitting on a wall." There were endless variations on how they were dressed. The mother had gone out to get a bite to eat (possibly at a White Castle), or she'd been drinking. But she was indeed raising her children alone and was facing ten to twenty years in prison if convicted

of jeopardizing their welfare. According to one source, she had no history with the police.

Predictably, the most alarmist accounts came from television: “The question tonight,” boomed a male news anchor, “is did the boys sneak out of the house or did something more sinister happen?”—only to be immediately followed by an on-site reporter who said that “(the) two boys walked out the front door and came here to this parking lot and hit the town on their own.” The younger boy, she informed viewers, was not eighteen months but *just* eighteen months, and the friend’s house was not a friend’s house but an *unfamiliar* house. A graphic in the upper left corner of the screen, a pyramid of ABC blocks in primary colors, underscored the children’s vulnerability. I looked closely at the parking lot in the background: it was bustling, as one might expect at 5:00 p.m. on a Friday—cars coming and going, shoppers loading bags into back seats. The bottom right corner of the screen gave the temperature: seventy-two degrees.

It was, in effect, a different place entirely from thirteen hours before.

## II

*A supermarket exterior is a subject that will probably never make a wall-worthy image by itself.* —<http://photo.net/learn/architectural/exterior>  
(a tutorial on photographing architecture)

Still, I rather like the grocery store in the black-and-white photo that accompanies the tutorial, taken at night somewhere in Hawaii almost twenty years ago. It looks modest by today’s standards, with half a dozen cars nosed diagonally right up front and another row of open parking slots along the lot’s perimeter. The building is low-lying, boasting a cheap pediment adorned with the words BIG SAVE in neon and a glass façade that barely seems able to contain the fluorescence that floods the interior—a light so numinous (an effect exaggerated by the long exposure) that you might expect, upon passing through the automatic doors, to encounter something revelatory.

But the photographer wanted something more, something “wall-worthy,” so he backed up, perhaps almost as far as the road, to

capture “the spirit of being in the parking lot at night.” I liked that he wrote “*the* parking lot” rather than “*a* parking lot,” implying that not all parking lots have the same nocturnal temperament, that the spirit he detected belonged to that particular lot, though if he’d written “*that* night” he could have refined it even more.

A parking lot, in other words, that is more place than displacement (of trees, ferns, earth). By day, such a lot is an emblem of car and consumer culture, an accoutrement of development so ubiquitous, our behavior in it so automatic, that we hardly give it a thought. But in the off hours it’s the ultimate *tabula rasa*—subject, it’s been said, to personal projection. It is less what it is than a state of mind, even if we’re standing in the middle of it. Even if we are photographing it. It is different from other spaces that have been deserted and laid bare: dance halls and playing fields and even theater stages, which is what it most calls to mind with its stagy lighting, its air of expectancy. In these other places you can still hear echoes of what took place there; in a parking lot you must work from scratch. It’s marked by transience, is, night or day, rarely a destination in itself, except when football fans tailgate before a game, or grown men, with and without sons, race radio control cars, or the young and restless congregate at night to do nothing—unless, as I once read, it’s exam season in Conakry, Guinea, when boys and girls of all ages study on curbs and concrete pilings in the airport’s parking lot, some walking more than an hour to reach its pools of electric light because the alternative is to work at home by candlelight.

I wondered how people envisioned it, other than as a mere convenience or a necessary eyesore. What were its powers of suggestion. And so while attempting to keep abreast of the mother and her toddlers I found myself also browsing the Web for images, as if they might provide clues to how a few ordinary, unadorned words—“supermarket,” “parking lot,” “4:00 a.m.”—could, in combination, set in motion the scenic detour I took before falling asleep that night. As if they might, somehow, corroborate it. And while the journalists who wrote and spoke those words can’t take credit (or blame) for their reverberations—they hardly could have avoided using them—I wondered whether they and their editors weren’t well aware of their collective impact (or was it more subconscious?), whether this played a part in why they chose to report the boys’ minor misadventure, a mishap a police officer said was not

unheard of, rather it was the time it took to find the mother—about three hours, not “a short time later” as the *Times* had reported—that was unusual.

Because this is what I came to believe, rightly or wrongly: that if the boys’ one-and-a-half-block trek at 4:00 a.m. had taken them to the small triangular park at the end of my street, where they might sit on a bench and swing their legs back and forth, or had led them to a flagstone path through a neighbor’s well-tended garden, or even to a shopping plaza, but a more intimate one—with a yarn shop and a yoga studio and a deli (all the more likely, not incidentally, if the children had been visiting a tonier neighborhood), there would have been no story. And possibly no arrest, though that is an entirely different sort of inquiry.

...

Picture the toddlers in that Big Save parking lot (since we have no night image of the actual lot in New Jersey, we’re free to imagine anything). In the photo, where it makes up just over half the composition, it’s depressingly plain, even for a parking lot. The asphalt, stained and patchy, is a ghostly version of the coal-colored sky, which indicates a night so dark you couldn’t vouch for your own presence. There are no obvious sources of illumination other than the grocery store, shining like a beacon, and, to the store’s right, a brick or stucco box that must be apartments—translucent curtains are pulled across the two side windows—though one hesitates to imagine anyone calling it home. There’s an abandoned shopping cart, two of them together in fact, in the foreground, gleaming dully where they’ve come to a stop against a chipped concrete bumper barrier. Whether by accident or design, they are perpendicular to each other, their front ends pointing in different directions as if in a show of mutual indifference.

But the setting’s not quite right. Maybe the lot’s too small, its few cars dated and therefore tinted with nostalgia. Maybe, despite the overall gloom, the store’s aura connotes guidance and hope, draws you to it like a lighthouse. Or perhaps it’s the shopping carts—not so aloof after all but like a pair of men who are hanging out, nonchalantly talking and smoking, being careful not to display too much

affection. Yet affectionate nonetheless. Not the sort of place that would cause a cab driver to curse a mother.

Wherever I encountered photographs of two shopping carts in an otherwise empty, or near empty, lot, as at the Big Save, it seemed clear that something relational was going on. A shopping cart down on its side, just short of a Plexiglas corral, and a second cart making toward the shadows as if it's leaving the scene of a crime. A swaddled infant Jesus in a shopping cart filled with straw and rimmed with Christmas lights, smack in the middle of a parking space, while another cart, wayward and barren, begins to fade into twilight. (The caption reads: "Parking lot with Baby Jesus in shopping cart decorated with lights depicting the loss of the true meaning of Christmas"; when I zoomed the image, the infant appeared to be real.)

A casual perusal of the myriad photographs of commercial parking lots on the Web, however, by amateurs and professionals alike, suggests that it is the single shopping cart, invariably empty, that is the object of greatest fascination, its portrayals having inherited the Romantics' penchant for the solitary figure in a vast, if now denatured, landscape. A cart in the middle of a dark lot, for example, the atmosphere so vaporous and mystical that the lampposts are all but obliterated, leaving only their fuzzy orbs as if the sky held a dozen moons. A green cart used as a trash can and casting a long shadow across a particularly grim lot. Or an orange cart on the margins, hard against a curb as if it has come to the end of its life. Granted, few of these evoke Friedrich's monk-by-the-sea-contemplating-infinity (the sort of figure you see from behind and who allows you to see through him to something sublime), or the poet-scholar "leisurely walking with the moon," as in a Ming Dynasty scroll. Rather, these tend to be the shunned, the exiled, the jilted, the bereaved, the marginalized, the more than gently melancholic. And if those other artists identified with their subjects' contemplative, if not always tranquil, solitude, the shopping cart photographers seemed to identify with *their* subjects' abject alienation, as if they saw the carts as repositories for their own emptiness.

Some shopping carts, however, reject this template; they refuse to be objects of pity or compassion. I liked one in particular. Glinting red and silver, it looks dangerously seductive, like a decoy. It stands

alone on the luminous top deck of a parking garage at night, the bluish concrete as shiny as linoleum that's been mopped and waxed, the sunken lights of an anonymous city's outskirts in the pitch beyond the deck's edge. A nervous undercurrent runs through the image: the cart seems to have an uncanny sensitivity to its surroundings; you fear it might move toward you of its own accord, that it's in cahoots with something that has you under surveillance. This cart made it big: part of Doug Aitken's video installation, *Electric Earth*, it debuted at the 1999 Venice Biennale and was invited the following year to the Whitney Biennial, where it graced the cover of the exhibition catalog.<sup>1</sup>

Objects other than carts take their solo turns upon a dark, vacant lot. A single automobile, for example, hulking like a nocturnal beast. Or, in one stark image, a distant street lamp, flanked by two skeletal trees and casting a gold light over its small dominion—a dirt island in the middle of a deserted lot in Chicago. What all these studies of isolation have in common is that they make you feel like you are the only one around—that the island, enveloped in a kind of theatrical silence, is you.

...

The photographer William Eggleston claimed, perhaps in defense of his own often mundane subject matter, that “(t)he world is so visually complicated that the word ‘banal’ scarcely is very intelligent to use.” As a synonym for “trite,” it seems fair enough to use against some of the overplayed imagery I had come across. But of course

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<sup>1</sup>The shopping-cart-as-muse may have reached its apotheosis, however, in *The Stray Shopping Carts of Eastern North America: A Guide to Field Identification*. Here I learned of an entirely new category of lone shopping cart—the *true stray*: “a cart that will not be returned to the SOURCE from which it originated.” These include carts upended in creeks, carts destroyed by plows and unceremoniously dumped atop huge mounds of dirty snow (a specimen that “rarely occurs in the southern regions of the United States”), carts that had been hooked over ONE WAY signs or pushed down stairs or thrown off bridges or otherwise “radically resituated,” carts on the roofs of high-rises, carts in overgrown and trash-strewn lots and bearing the names of defunct businesses. But these carts, by straying far from their source, stray also from that locus of dread, the parking lot, which is, after all, where the toddlers were found that night in June—in it or on the edge of it.



Eggleston meant that the thing-in-itself was not, could not be, banal (never mind that “suburban banality” rolls so easily off the tongue); there could only be stale representations of it.

The words “nondescript” and “vacant” present similar problems. (In a novel, I come to a passage in which a man looks out the window as his train speeds past “nondescript” homes and I want to know: does he see vinyl siding or unembellished brick façades?—and can a lot be truly “vacant”?). But if too often they betray a lack of observation, they are useful in a relative sort of way; there is something else, they are saying, that deserves more attention.

Eggleston, not surprisingly, got a lot of mileage out of a parking lot. Where many of the amateur photos are ordinary in conception—a quality that is useful, in the aggregate, for what it suggests about our common imagination—Eggleston’s lot is singularly expressive. Photographed somewhere in Arkansas in the early 1970s, it is as lyrical, as pensive, as a nocturne for the piano. At the picture’s far right, a red arrow on an elevated neon sign points across a sparsely populated lot toward the Southgate Shopping Center, a thin blurred strip that joins lot and sky. The brooding expanse of asphalt is laid out beneath a nearly extinguished sunset and a great dispersal of clouds—still pink and tinged with mauve, like roses gone up in smoke. The soaring lampposts—twenty or more of them—have graceful, outstretched arms, their hands cupping ellipses of light, as if, on cue and in unison, they are about to step off their concrete bases and dance. I could imagine going there, wanting to see it for myself, but I doubt it ever existed—not like in the picture, not quite as beautiful as that, not without Eggleston’s eye and the way he holds the camera, so that the ground tilts, slightly, disconcertingly, and the pavement markings, yellow and faint in the foreground, angle sharply toward a vanishing point.

### III

One night in August, I woke at about 4:15. I lay in bed listening to the window fan, which always gives me the odd feeling of being on a plane in mid-flight, the low whir sounding like air circulating throughout the cabin. It provided little relief except as a white noise machine, and within a minute or two I knew, in that reluctant way of knowing, that I would not get back to sleep. Watching the clock turn over its digital numbers, it occurred to me that the toddlers

were discovered outside the New Jersey A&P at about this time, two months before. In mid-July I'd read that the mother had been released from jail on her own recognizance after almost four weeks, having pleaded guilty to two counts of child endangerment (later, from a court document easily accessible on the Web, I would learn that her bond, which had been reduced by half, was paid with cash backed by property), and that no date was set for the return of the children—there was no guarantee that they *would* be returned—though the mother was now undergoing parenting and alcoholism counseling to avoid further incarceration. I took the counseling as a hopeful sign, along with the comments of her attorney: "This was a good ending. This woman loves her children very much and has been crying for them every day."

I suspected that this was indeed the end as far as the press was concerned (months later, the *Times* had yet to follow up on its original report, and a reporter for one of the New Jersey papers would tell me, in response to my e-mail, that she'd heard nothing new since summer). The story, in people's minds anyway, would forever be open-ended, a narrative suspended. We would probably never find out where the family lived and what had brought them to New Jersey, though there had been some mention of the death of a friend. We would never learn whether the door had been left unlocked or the older child unlatched it; a judge acknowledged that the boy was "precocious" and prone to taking initiative. We would never know the mother's true degree of negligence relative to that of other parents: my own mother, when she read the *Times* article, had a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I response—there was that time, she reminded me, when my eighteen-month-old brother, refreshed from his nap, left our cottage in Lake George and traipsed deep into the woods while the rest of us were preoccupied with gathering our suits and towels for a trip to the beach.

It also occurred to me, looking at the clock, that I had never gone shopping in the middle of the night—not even close—and that I had no idea how many people did and what it was like. The longer I thought about it, the harder it was to resist the urge to get up and go, especially when I remembered that we had yet to re-stock our refrigerator after returning from vacation the night before and so had no orange juice for breakfast, no milk for cereal.

We shop for groceries six blocks away, at a supermarket sandwiched between a state highway and a flood control channel that doesn't always do the job; after heavy rains and snowmelts, the water flows out onto the blacktop, at least once bringing fish along for the ride. In all four seasons, as long as the channel isn't frozen, a kayaker might glide silently by as you roll your groceries to your car—paddling in the direction of the Wal-Mart; the Wendy's; the Dollar Tree; the Bed Bath & Beyond. The supermarket, a Wegmans, is a showcase store: in addition to food shopping or eating-in you can drop off your dry cleaning and get your pictures developed and try out the patio furniture and supervise the florist assembling your bouquet and watch as your party balloons are filled with helium and peruse newspapers from far-off places like Miami, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, all while your children play or watch videos in the Fun Center, unless they prefer to push child-sized carts with "Shopper in Training" flags or sit in the driver's seat of full-sized carts shaped like cars. We always take out-of-town guests there for meals, instructing them to choose from the deli; the sushi stand; buffets that offer Chinese, Mediterranean, or vegetarian fare; counters that serve pasta or salads or submarine sandwiches or fried chicken or pizza. On Fridays, an area is set aside for the preparation of fish fry. We eat on the upper level of the food court under a trellis of faux grapevines while a player piano runs through an assortment of jazzy tunes and classical music (and Christmas carols during the holidays, with a Santa mannequin seated on the piano bench, his hands arranged over the keyboard and his head thrown back in merriment). We might go back downstairs to order cappuccinos and pastries. Which is to say that the combination of plenitude and crush and cacophony (of carts and kids and coffee makers) calls to mind Don DeLillo's supermarket-as-church, "very rich in magic and dread."

Which also is to say that such a store needs an immense parking lot—a lot that two male clerks in produce, after a quick consultation, estimated to be at least the size of three football fields, maybe four.

I parked where I came in—at the remote end of the lot, though there were just five cars in that great spread, all as close to the entrance as they could get. Or almost as close, for it seems that, given the choice, people will apply the principles of personal space to their cars and leave a comfortable distance between them. I sat for a few minutes, feeling silly and not above suspicion; if I were

closer, I'd at least have appeared to be waiting for someone. From my car, it was hard not to view the lot as just a lot, an interval between where I was and where I wanted to be, with little of note along the way. At what point, I had to wonder, did close observation and a thorough mulling over become a matter of making too much of something, or even something out of nothing, especially when the subject is the most prosaic (Eggleston notwithstanding) of landscapes? Perhaps on reading the *Times* article, whose 385 words included not one word guilty of embellishment, I'd had an exaggerated response to *where* the children were found—a relatively unimportant detail (they shouldn't have been alone *anywhere* at that hour), a detail my imagination ran with because it was past the hour of reason and I was lying in the dark.

The Wegmans lot was too uniformly lighted for the projection of anyone's worst fears, unlike the dusky metro lot in the Washington, D.C. neighborhood I'd once lived in—a lot that, after a night class, I'd hurry across with a pounding heart. Yet when I got out of my car there was that familiar heightening of the senses, that same sensation of being exposed. (It didn't help that I was wearing the shorts and T-shirt I'd slept in to avoid waking my husband, whose head was inches from my closet door.) Perhaps it's in our DNA, a discomfort with open spaces; I was overly visible, away from the pack, easy prey. I could barely see beyond the lot's borders, but others, if they were out there, could see in. Or maybe it was like walking onto a stage for a solo performance, which is something I've always avoided and get nervous just thinking about—though oddly I had to suppress an impulse to twirl, conceivably another natural response to wide-open space, so confined are we normally by aisles, alleys, corridors, paths, sidewalks, trails, our lane in the road and in the pool.

I studied the lampposts for the first time: they were cylindrical and tapered toward the top, each culminating in double shoebox-style fixtures emitting a yellow-gold light. By day they are dominated by ring-billed gulls on the lookout for discarded and unguarded food, though I'd never witnessed so much as a spilled grocery bag or tossed wrapper. This was a sign of my own inattention, for clearly this was parking-lot-as-habitat, the gulls finding reason enough to scavenge here instead of along the lake shore, with its bounty of insects and dead fish. Their raucous calls, their *oooww-oooww-*

oooww's and staccato a-a-a-a-a's, suggested that much more went on in the lot than I knew.

Glancing down, I remembered a poem I'd read years earlier in which the oil stains in an after-hours D.C. parking garage were the "geography of something." I loved how that vague description fit its object so precisely. From Ed Ruscha's 1967 photographic essay, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, I would learn how distinctive oil stains are from the air. Ruscha, who went up in a helicopter with a commercial photographer who did the shooting, said he was less interested in the lots' geometry than in their patterns of stains. They are inseparable, of course—the stains forced into a pattern determined by the rigid spatial order of the parking lot, clear as a game board about where things should go, so that they become like ink, repeatedly stamped, one imprint after another.

Ruscha's oil-stained lots, wrote a prominent art critic, are about the past; another arts writer described them as sociological. They are evidence, after all, of where we've been and how often we've been there—and how, of course, we got there. *Evidence*: a term belonging more to documentation than to art, meaning the sort of pictures you examine with a cool eye and that arouse none of the moodiness I'd come to expect of deserted lots. Except that time has given them an eerie cast. The slim volume was issued in soft-cover, and my library copy was tucked into a cardboard pamphlet binder whose spine had split and been taped back together. That tenuousness, one threadbare and disintegrating spine inside another, combined with the dated look of the black-and-white photos, and the fact that they were taken on a Sunday morning when the lots were sure to be empty of both people and cars, evokes an Anasazi-like abandonment, the oil stains the residue of a vanished life.<sup>2</sup>

The early morning silence was not so deathly at Wegmans. A street-cleaning vehicle was angling around the islands of landscap-

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<sup>2</sup>Across the country, four decades later, Patrick Mimran photographed the entrances of more than forty Manhattan parking garages at night. Like Ruscha, he collected them in a book: *Car Parks in New York*. Unlike Ruscha, Mimran worked in color, and his photographs are especially vibrant thanks to neon signage and brightly painted cinderblock and the like. "The artist is showing us entrances to parking areas?" French critic Paul Ardenne wrote in the introduction. "Very well. But also the entrances to unknown worlds, to hell, to the vulva, permitting access to a matrix, to a uterine world."

ing—begonias and grasses and shrubs whose hues were washed out in the sodium haze, as if they belonged to a distant, more enervated planet. It all seemed to come down to the quality of light, which in subtle ways tinkered with my spirits; my awareness of this did not make me immune to its effects. (The psychological effects of light are a large part of what all those photographs are about and explain why, in shooting the New Jersey lot in broad daylight, that TV news segment, despite its melodramatic posturing, got it wrong.)

Inside the store, I'd never had such an easy time of it, sailing through the aisles and the lone checkout lane without having to skirt a single cart, propelled by my desire to get out from under that shrill illumination. The lot, when I was back in it, was visually restful by comparison. Off to my left, the sky was beginning to brighten along the crown of East Hill, the buildings of the university backlit by a rising blue.

But in the valley it was still dark and I remained under the sway of the lot, where time operated under a different set of rules. It seemed dilatory under the influence of those tall lamps, the future put on hold, so that the groceries I carried for the coming day and the days to follow were more articles of faith than of certainty. Yet there was something mutable about it as well, a low-grade restlessness that hinted at the possibility of a sudden shift in tempo or temperament, such that even on this, the most level of surfaces—which not so long ago had unrolled out of nothing much and nowhere in particular—you couldn't help but feel a little off-balance. And if I didn't envision anyone lurking in the shadows—nothing as dramatic or as threatening as that—this subtle undermining of rationality was disconcerting enough, and I could understand why, when he encountered two unattended and half-dressed children that June night, children who must have looked for a moment more conjured than real, the cab driver felt that it was the most troubling thing he had seen in a quarter century on the job.

As for the children, whether they were running through the parking lot or along the sidewalk, or sitting on a curb or on a wall—likely all of these things before he took the initiative and gathered them up—they looked like they were having a good time, the cab driver admitted to a TV news camera. Or, as he put it to the *Times* reporter: *Like they were in their backyard.*